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Making policies and procedures work for you

Highlights

- Effective policies and procedures use clear, concise, simple language.

- Define terms in policies and procedures to avoid confusing the document user.

- Implement internal control activities and identify who is responsible for those activities in agency procedures.

Consider your agency mission. Are you clear on how your work contributes to that mission? One place this should be clear is in agency policies and procedures. Policies guide management decision making and must reflect the mission statement and goals of the agency. Procedures guide employees into action and provide a series of steps to follow for a consistent and repetitive approach to accomplish agency goals, and ultimately, agency mission.

Written policies and procedures are vital to the design and implementation of a strong internal control system. Every state agency faces obstacles and risks when it comes to managing policies and procedures. Here are a few tips to help achieve effective and efficient policies and procedures in your agency.

Be clear, concise, and simple. Effective policies and procedures use clear, concise, plain language. Try to limit technical language to make the document simple enough for a new employee to understand. The structure of policies and procedures should focus users on the aspect of the policy or procedure related to their decision or task. One way to do this is to use labels or headers to introduce key points.

Use consistent and defined terminology. Define terms in both policies and procedures to avoid confusing the user. Also, try to limit unnecessary options or choices on how to complete tasks. One way to eliminate risk is minimize the different ways users complete a procedure. For example, instead of "submit to your supervisor," try, "complete Form B and mail it to your supervisor within 4 business days." However, recognize in some cases, you may need to balance the need for consistency with the agency need for flexibility to keep policies and procedures relevant. Also, don't include information that is so specific it will require ongoing revisions such as individual employee names.

Identify control activities. Implement internal control activities and identify who is responsible for those activities.

Common internal controls in procedures include: instances where duties are divided among different employees to reduce the risk of error or inappropriate actions; steps that require authorization or approval of an activity to ensure it is consistent with agency policy or procedure; the performance of reviews of specific functions or activities focused on compliance, financial, or operational issues (may involve cross-checking transactions or records of activity to ensure information is accurate); and steps to ensure equipment, inventories, cash, checks and other assets are physically secured and periodically counted and compared with amounts shown on control records.

Communicate revisions. Information and communication are the fourth component of a strong internal control system. Effective and efficient communication supports the achievement of agency goals and agency mission. Policies and procedures are foundational control activities. When revisions are made make wide spread communication of the revisions a required part of the policy and procedure updating process.

The tips on style, organization, language, the inclusion of control activities, and the importance of communication above will improve your agency policies and procedures and likely reduce mistakes and cut costs and time. Capturing agency policies and documenting the best way to perform a task in a procedure allows everyone to be more efficient. Additionally, clear policies and procedures improve internal and external communication and increase the likelihood you will achieve your agency mission.

Suggested Action Steps: Pick an agency policy or procedure. Use our Policy and Procedure Tips to see if your policies and procedures support you and your agency in the best way possible.

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